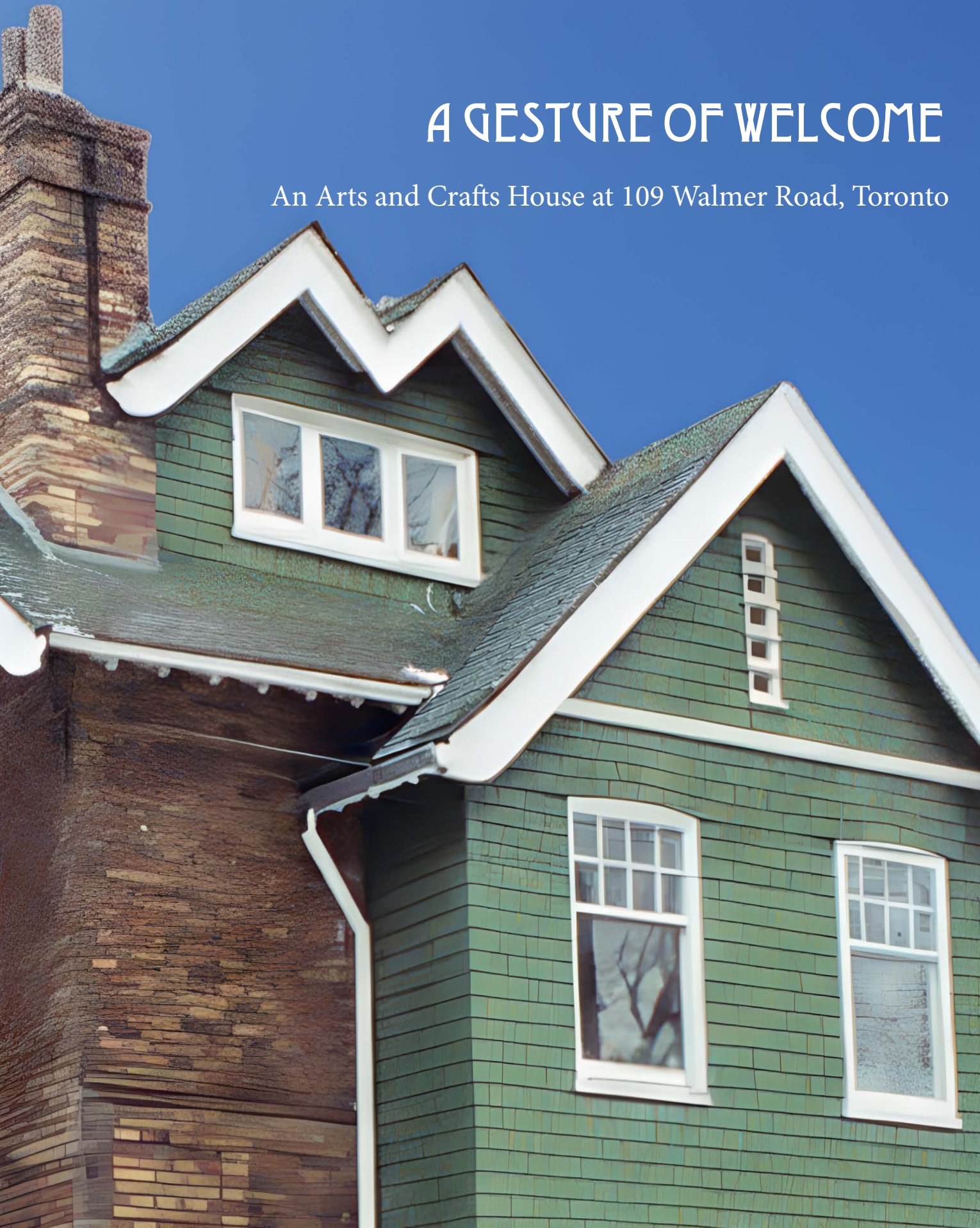


# A GESTURE OF WELCOME

An Arts and Crafts House at 109 Walmer Road, Toronto



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AN ARTS AND CRAFTS HOUSE AT 109 WALMER ROAD, TORONTO



MARK K. HAND

2026

“One of the most evocative, appealing houses in the Annex”

— Architectural historian Patricia McHugh, in the book *Toronto Architecture: A City Guide*

# INTRODUCTION

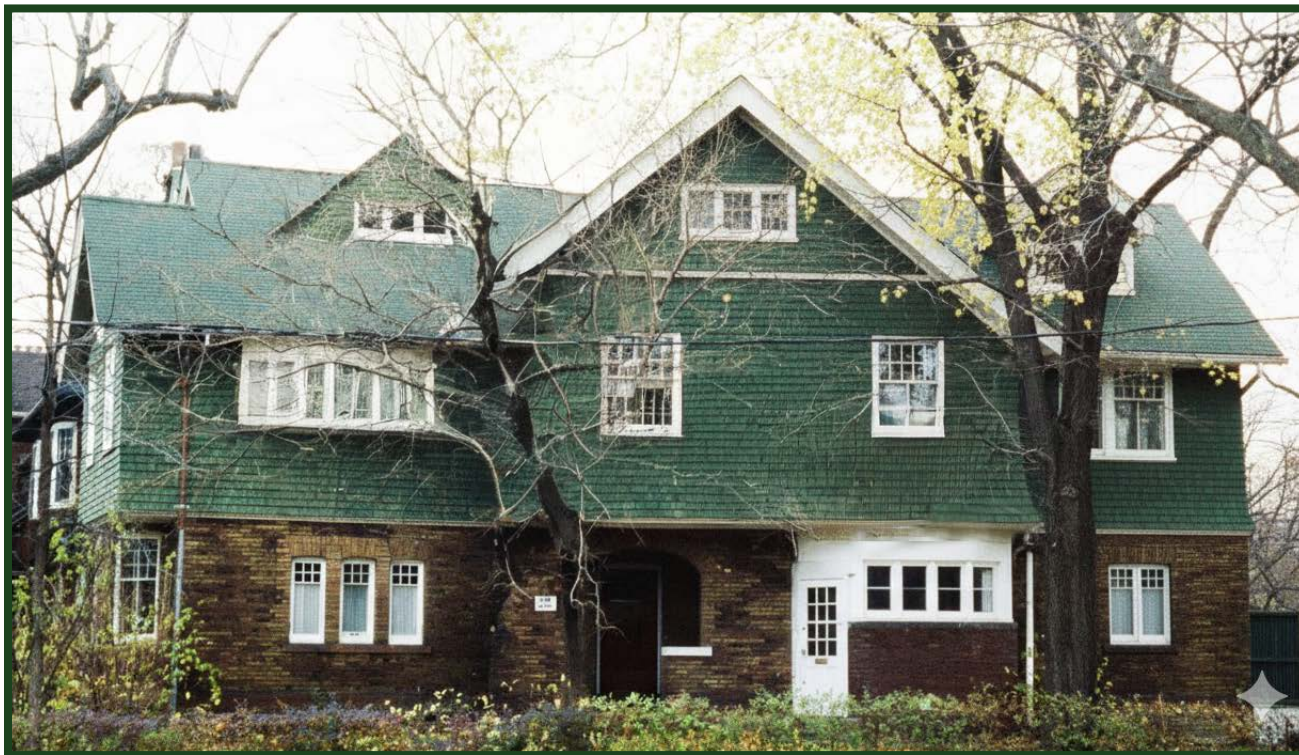
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In 1992, my husband, Paul Gravett, and I purchased the house at 109 Walmer Road, in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood. In addition to rehabilitating the house which had fallen into sad disrepair, I began to research the history of the home, its neighbourhood, its architect, and the original owners. Archival records were consulted, and outreach to descendants of the architect, S. Hamilton Townsend, and the first owner, James Watson, provided valuable information. In the intervening 34 years since 1992, the research and photographic record remained in storage until 2026, and now I have endeavoured to compile them into the readable form presented here. This account focuses on the period of our ownership and stewardship; what has happened to the house since lies beyond its scope.

I am particularly indebted to Douglas Watson, the grandson of the original owner, who in the 1990s, generously supplied fascinating details and colourful anecdotes not found in dusty archives; and as well, to Ann Macintosh Duff, Townsend's great-niece.

— Mark Hand





109 Walmer Road, in 1992

## 109 WALMER ROAD AND THE ANNEX

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IN THE 1904 city directory, 109 Walmer Road appears as the residence of James P. Watson, vice-president of E. & S. Currie Ltd., a Toronto neckwear manufacturer. Although the Watson family lived there only briefly—until about 1907—their occupancy places the house firmly within the social and economic world that shaped the Annex at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Annex itself was a product of Toronto's rapid northward expansion in the late nineteenth century. In 1886, land speculator Simeon Janes purchased a large tract extending from Bedford Road to roughly Spadina Road and from Bloor Street north to Dupont Street. Much of this land had already been surveyed and the streets named by the Baldwin family<sup>1</sup>, from whom Janes acquired it. A year later, Toronto City Council approved Janes's petition to extend the city limits, and the area was formally annexed. Toronto's gentry quickly followed, building substantial houses along newly laid-out streets. Walmer Road was conceived as one of the neighbourhood's most gracious streets. Its gentle curves and generous lots were intended for large, architect-designed houses, and early examples—such as No. 3 Walmer Road—illustrate the scale and ambition of this vision. While much of the early fabric south of Wells Street was later lost to redevelopment, the stretch north of Wells developed slightly later, with somewhat smaller lots after the turn of the century. It was within this evolving context that 109 Walmer Road took shape.

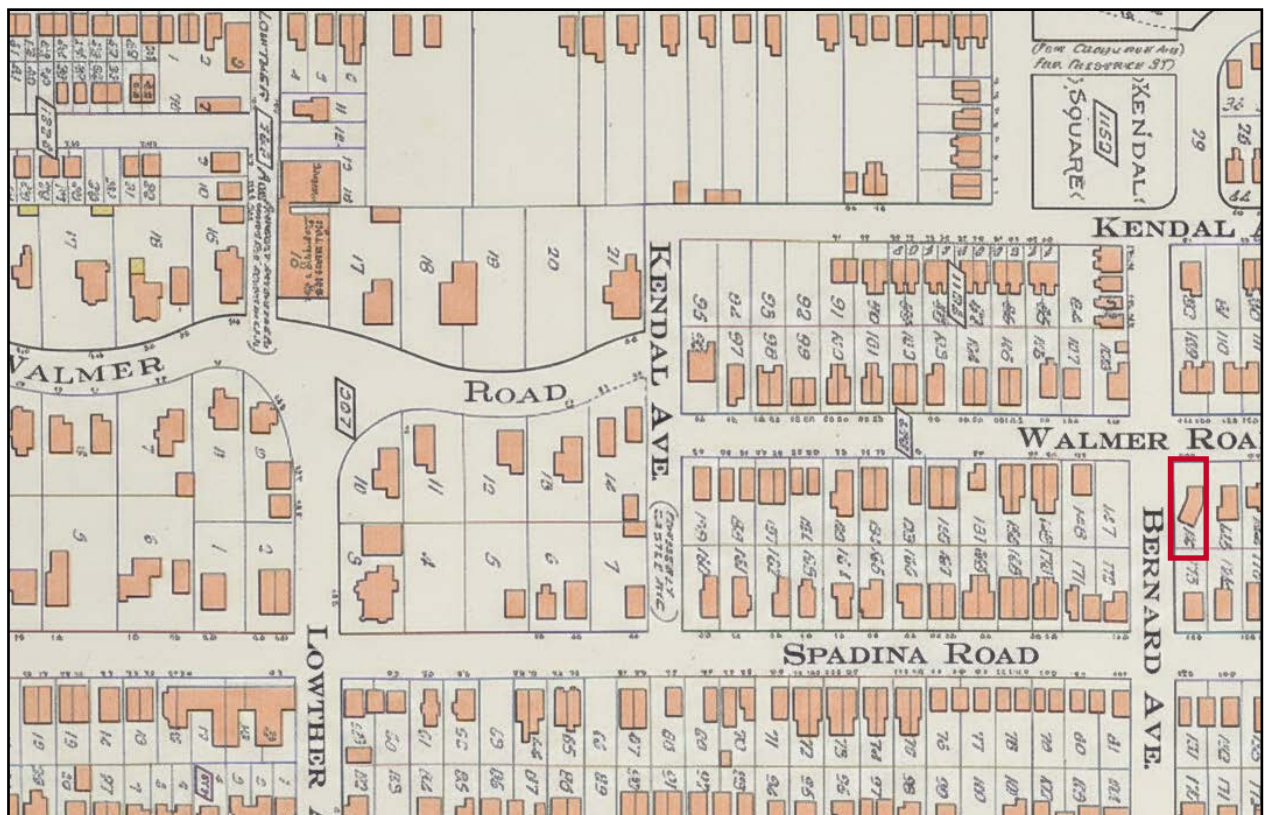
The Toronto Historical Board's *Inventory of Buildings* gives a construction date of 1894 for the house, but this date does not hold up under closer examination. The first mortgage on the property, taken out in 1895, was in the name of the Dancy family, who were builders. More decisively, a building permit issued in December 1901 authorized Mr. A. Nicholson to erect a two-storey brick residence with an attic at the northeast corner of Walmer Road and Bernard Avenue<sup>2</sup>. The architect named on the permit was S. Hamilton Townsend, and the builder was J. D. Spears. The value of the house at 109 was recorded as \$7,000. At least several other neighbouring houses on Walmer, at 87, 89, 113 and 117 were designed by Townsend.

Fire insurance maps from 1903 show that although the area had already been subdivided, relatively few houses had yet been constructed. When the 1903 fire insurance survey map was drawn, the lot at 109 Walmer Road was still va-

cant. The issuance of the 1901 building permit suggests a speculative development model, in which builders purchased lots, commissioned designs, and marketed completed houses—much as suburban developments are marketed today.

By 1904, construction along Walmer Road had accelerated. That year's city directory lists 109 Walmer Road as the residence of James P. Watson. In the city's 1906 assessment rolls, Watson, then aged forty-two, is recorded as living there with his wife Jane G. Watson (née Currie), their three children, and three additional residents, likely servants. The land was assessed at \$7,200. By 1910, fire insurance maps show a dramatic increase in building activity, and city directories suggest that 109 Walmer Road was likely completed in late 1903 or early 1904. By 1907 the house had passed to a new owner, George Wellington McGill.

Architectural historian Patricia McHugh, in the book *Toronto Architecture: A City Guide*, describes 109 Walmer Road as “one of the most evocative, appealing houses in the Annex.” Though built on a relatively small lot, she notes that “the angled wings and overhanging second storey make the house appear rambling and commodious.”



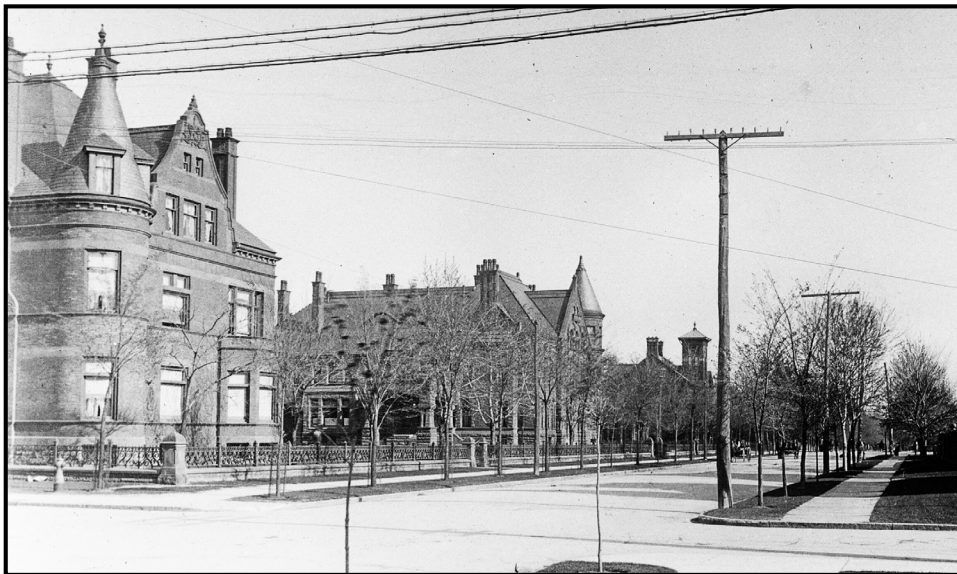
Fire insurance map of 1910<sup>3</sup>



That quality is immediately apparent. Every elevation of the house has its own personality. The roof lines are complex, the gables asymmetrical, and the massing carefully balanced. There is a distinctly Voysey-esque<sup>4</sup> influence in the composition. One of the most striking features is the angled plan itself. The arms of the house converge toward the front entrance, creating a sense of movement and an almost physical gesture of welcome as one approaches. Townsend appears to have particularly favoured corner lots, which allowed greater freedom in siting and massing and made the most of the approach to the house.



No. 3 Walmer Road ca. 1903<sup>5</sup>



St. George Street, 1895<sup>6</sup>





S. Hamilton Townsend <sup>7</sup>

# THE ARCHITECT

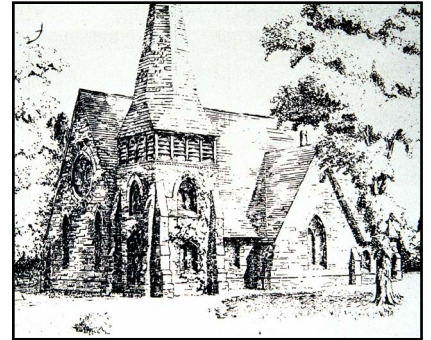
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## S. HAMILTON TOWNSEND: LIFE AND CAREER

SAMUEL HAMILTON TOWNSEND was born in Brantford, Ontario, in September 1856<sup>8</sup>, the son of John Thomas Townsend, an Englishman from Dorset who had emigrated to Canada in 1847, and Eliza Hamilton, a member of one of Upper Canada's most distinguished families<sup>9</sup>. Through his mother, Townsend was a descendant of Robert Hamilton — the merchant and public figure whose commercial empire helped shape the Niagara Peninsula in the late eighteenth century, and for whom the city of Hamilton is named. This lineage was not merely a genealogical curiosity; it connected Townsend to a specific landscape, a family tradition, and a set of cultural values that would quietly inflect his entire career. He appears to have taken genuine pride in the connection, rarely using his first name in professional life and preferring to be known simply as S. Hamilton Townsend.

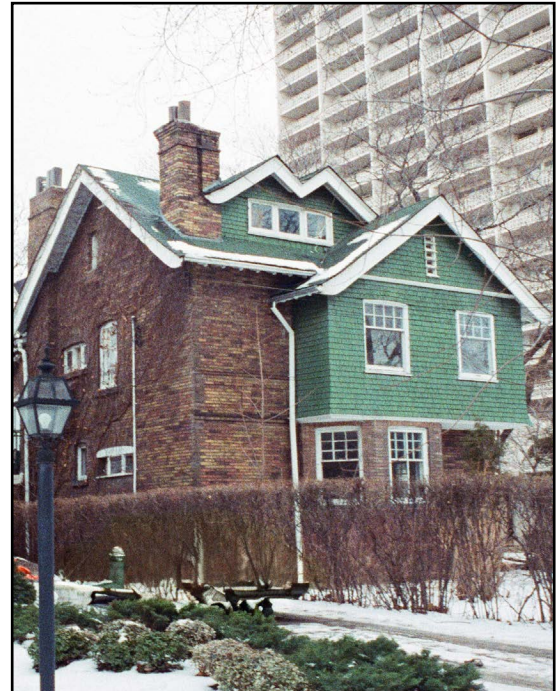
The family connection most tangible to Townsend was Willowbank, the Greek Revival mansion built around 1833 by his great-uncle Alexander Hamilton at Queenston, Ontario. Designed by architect John Latshaw in the Classical Revival manner, Willowbank was regarded as one of the finest houses in Upper Canada. Alexander Hamilton's early death in 1839 brought financial hardship to his descendants, and the house remained in family hands until 1934, but it endured as a symbol of the family's place in the history of the province. Townsend is buried in the small Hamilton family cemetery near Willowbank — a detail that suggests the connection to Queenston remained meaningful to him throughout his life. (The house survives today as a School of Restoration Arts, saved from demolition in 2003 by the Friends of Willowbank — a fitting afterlife for a building whose architect's great-nephew devoted his own career to thoughtful design.)

John Thomas Townsend, Samuel's father, had built a quiet but interesting life in Toronto's telegraph industry, working for the Great North West Telegraph Company and later the early telephone network. Family tradition holds that Alexander Graham Bell, experimenting with telephone transmission over telegraph wires, used John Thomas's lines — and that John Thomas owned one of the first working telephones in the city, later donated to the National Science Museum in Ottawa by his granddaughter Ann Duff.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not every detail of this family story is precisely accurate, it speaks



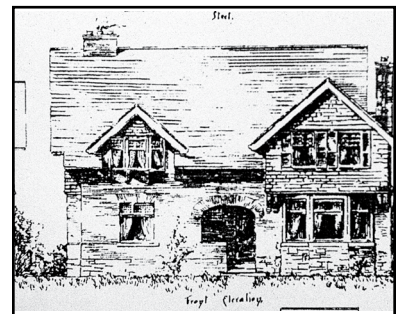
St. Saviour Church,  
in Queenston, Ontario designed by  
S. Hamilton Tonwsend



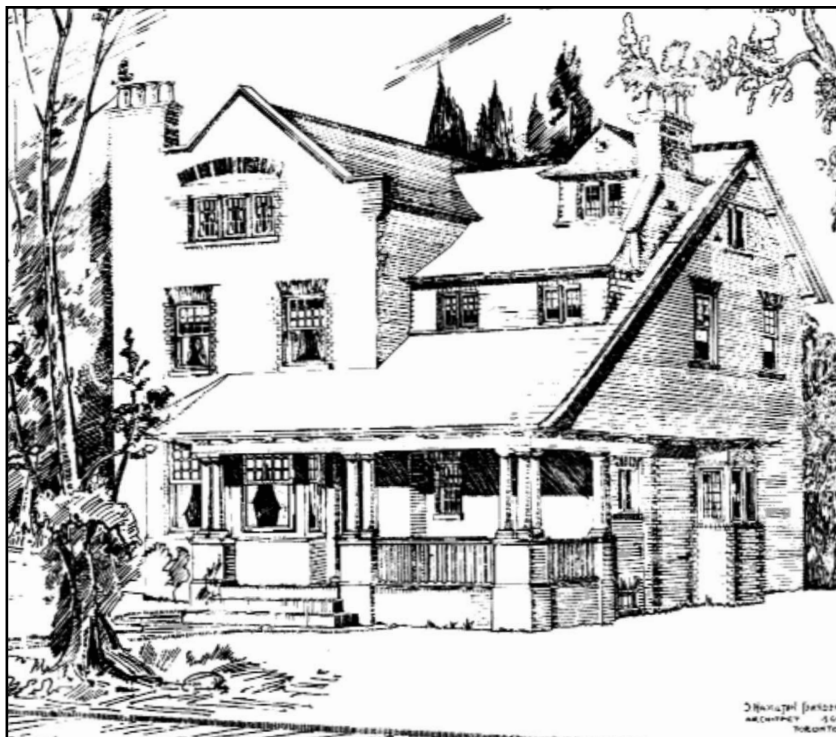


Façades showing roof lines at 109 Walmer





Examples of other Townsend homes illustrating some of the very distinctive features typical of his shingle-style houses.



Our neighbour's house at 113 Walmer as it looked in 1990s, also designed by Townsend, with his characteristic green shingles, windows, and typical roof-lines. The author was fortunate to see inside where many of the original features, such as inglenook benches, pantry built-ins still survived.





Some other Townsend homes

to a household at the intersection of technology and civic life — a background that may have inclined the younger Townsend toward the practical as well as the aesthetic dimensions of his profession.

## EDUCATION AND EARLY PRACTICE

The family moved to Toronto in 1868, and Samuel was educated at the city's Model School<sup>11</sup>. He apprenticed between 1874 and 1876 with William George Storm, one of the most respected architects then practising in Toronto, whose work included University College and numerous institutional buildings. Storm's office was a rigorous training ground, and Townsend supplemented his apprenticeship by attending Storm's home for the informal gatherings of the Toronto Architectural Guild — a circle of architects and designers who met to discuss ideas, critique each other's work, and keep abreast of developments in Britain and America. In 1877, Townsend entered a three-year partnership with Herbert Hancock. During the early 1880s he travelled to Europe, and his obituary suggests he used the journey in part to study architecture in England — an experience that would prove formative.

By 1886, at thirty years of age, Townsend had established his own practice. He was a founding member of the Ontario Association of Architects, incorporated in 1890, and served as its president in 1898 — the year in which his portrait appeared in the *Canadian Architect and Builder*<sup>12</sup>. In April 1891, he delivered a lecture to the association critiquing domestic architecture using lantern slides, an event that suggests both his standing in the profession and his belief that residential design deserved serious intellectual attention.

His personal life presented a characteristic Victorian picture of deferred domesticity. He remained unmarried until approximately his sixtieth year, living for much of his middle age in the family household and later at his brother Charles's home at 29 Crescent Road. He was, by family recollection, an enthusiastic early adopter of the automobile, a keen cyclist — in 1897 he bicycled through the American South with a companion named Gemmell<sup>13</sup> — and a committed yachtsman. He and friends are said to have helped establish a yacht club that predated the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, of which he became a lifelong member. He designed and owned a yacht named *Wah-Wah*, which won the Prince of Wales Cup in 1897. James Watson was also a life member of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club. It was likely through the Yacht Club that he became familiar with the work of Hamilton Townsend and perhaps how he ended being the first occupant of 109 Walmer Road.



## TOWNSEND'S RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

S. Hamilton Townsend is a figure whose work places him squarely within Toronto's Arts and Crafts tradition of the early twentieth century. Active during a period when the city was expanding rapidly north and west, he produced a body of residential work that emphasised craftsmanship, thoughtful planning, and a restrained but confident use of materials. His houses, commissioned by prosperous professional and business families, reflected contemporary ideas about domestic comfort while also conveying a sense of permanence and artistic seriousness.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Townsend reached the height of his powers. He produced a substantial body of residential work in the Annex and, most notably, in the MacPherson Estate subdivision now known as Rosedale. From a survey of his surviving work, his houses fall into three broad stylistic families.

The first might be described as the "cottage style" — characterised by sweeping rooflines that descend over the second storey and often shelter the entrance, conveying a strong sense of informality and shelter. These appear on Walmer Road, Admiral Road, Chestnut Park Road, and throughout Rosedale.

The second group consists of more formal, manorial houses, often executed in stone and marked by strong horizontality and mass. Asymmetrical gables are a recurring motif, and the influence of English Arts and Crafts architects — most clearly C. F. A. Voysey — is unmistakable. Patricia McHugh described these houses as "taut," noting their confident synthesis of English Arts and Crafts principles with emerging North American influences.

The third group — into which 109 Walmer Road falls — is characterised by extensive use of cedar shingles cascading down the upper storeys. In these houses, the internal arrangement of rooms appears to dictate the exterior form, resulting in dynamic, sculptural massing. Every elevation has its own personality. The roof lines are complex, the gables asymmetrical, the massing carefully balanced.

Townsend favoured corner lots, which allowed greater freedom in siting and gave full rein to his interest in the approach to a building. At 109 Walmer Road, the angled plan is one of the most striking features: the arms of the house converge toward the front entrance. His interiors were organised around generous shared rooms rather than formal display — the living-room inglenook at 109 Walmer Road forms a clear focal point identical in form to those found in several neighbouring Townsend houses, and built-in cabinetry, thoughtful



### Hamilton Family Estate "Willowbank"<sup>14</sup>

Willowbank was the family home of Alexander Hamilton (1790-1839). Alexander was a businessman, militia officer, Justice of the Peace, Sheriff, Judge, and Postmaster. He had a lasting impact on the community and was important in the history of Upper Canada.

Around 1833, he began construction of a mansion at Queenston known as Willowbank. The house was designed by John Latshaw and serves as an example of Classical Revival architecture.

Alexander's untimely death in 1839 brought financial hardship upon his family. The house remained in the Hamilton family until 1934. At that time, the Bright family (founders of Bright's Wines), purchased Willowbank. After the Brights, Willowbank had several other owners. Eventually, a developer purchased the property and a demolition request was submitted. In 2003, an organisation known as the Friends of Willowbank saved the house from demolition. A School of Restoration Arts was established at Willowbank in 2006, providing students with a mix of theory and hands-on learning.

circulation, and a clear hierarchy of spaces demonstrate his equal concern for function and atmosphere.

Although Townsend's archival records provide a clear outline of his professional activity, they reveal little of the man himself. In the course of this research, Mark and Paul were fortunate to make the acquaintance of Townsend's great-niece, the painter Ann Macintosh Duff, whose recollections helped to illuminate aspects of his life and working methods otherwise absent from the archival record. Through her, Townsend comes into view not merely as a name on a building permit, but as a figure rooted in a family tradition that had long valued design, craftsmanship, and the visual arts — a tradition that stretched, in a continuous line, from the Hamilton family's Greek Revival mansion at Queenston to the cedar-shingle houses of the Toronto Annex.

Townsend retired around 1913 and died in Toronto on 27 March 1940, aged eighty-three. He is buried, as noted, in the Hamilton family cemetery at Queenston — the same ground that holds his Upper Canadian ancestors, and not far from Willowbank, the house that had always seemed to him a kind of origin.

### SELECTED WORKS OF S. HAMILTON TOWNSEND<sup>15</sup>

#### Residences (Toronto unless noted)

St. George Street at Lowther Avenue, James O. Buchanan, 1889-90 · Nassau Street, houses, 1891 · St. Joseph Street, James Hedley, 1891 · Wellesley Street West, William Boulton (alterations), 1892 · Spencer Avenue, Ernest G. Orme, 1893 · Crescent Road, Alfred E. Boulton, 1895 · Bernard Avenue, Alex Orr, 1898 · Crescent Road, several houses on the Macpherson Estate, 1899-1901 · Crescent Road, Charles J. Townsend, 1899 · Crescent Road, W. Mulock Boulton, 1899 · Park Road, Charles N. Candee, 1899 · **Walmer Road near Bernard Avenue, Andrew Nicholson, 1901 · Walmer Road at Bernard Avenue, James P. Watson, 1901-02 (109 Walmer Road)** · Cluny Avenue, several houses on the Macpherson Estate, 1902 · McKenzie Avenue at Dale Avenue, Albert E. Kemp, 1903 · Madison Avenue, William M. Douglas, 1903 · Cluny Avenue, Ferguson J. Dunbar, 1904 · Cluny Avenue at Crescent Road, John J. Dixon, 1904 · Dovercourt Road, Dr. J. H. McLane, 1904 · Chestnut Park Road, James C. Foy, 1905 · Chestnut Park Road, Wilbur C. Matthews, 1906 · Chestnut Park Road, W. T. Giles, 1906 · Elm Avenue, Richard B. Fudger, 1906 · Rusholme Road, Samuel Jardine, 1907 · Beaumont Road, Henry C. McLeod, 1907 · Crescent Road, Charles H. Mortimer, 1907 · South Drive, Walter H. Clemes, 1907 · Chestnut Park Road, Dr. Harvey Vaux, 1908 · Hawthorne Gardens, William P. Gundy, 1910 · Chestnut Park Road, W. C. Matthews, 1910 · Roxborough Street East, T. Bradley Hyde, 1911 · Sherbrooke, Que., J. M. Jenckes, 1901. **Additional Walmer Road houses: 113 and 117,**

#### Other Works

St. Saviour's Brock Memorial Anglican Church, Queenston, Ont., 1877-79 · St. Peter's Anglican Church Sunday School, Bleecker at Carlton, Toronto, 1879 · Sarnia High School (addition), 1888 · Sarnia Collegiate, London Road, 1889-91 · Union Bank, Wellington Street West (addition), 1894 · Royal Canadian Yacht Club, Esplanade Street West, 1896 · Evening News Printing Co., Yonge Street (new façade), 1899 · Gutta Percha Rubber Co., O'Hara Avenue (factory and addition), 1900-03 · Polson Iron Works, Esplanade East at Sherbourne, 1902 · First Christian Church, Bathurst near College, 1904



# REHABILITATION OF 109 WALMER ROAD

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THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN this section document the house as it was found in 1992 and as it appeared following restoration, approximately 1992–1996. They record a moment in the house’s history rather than its current state.

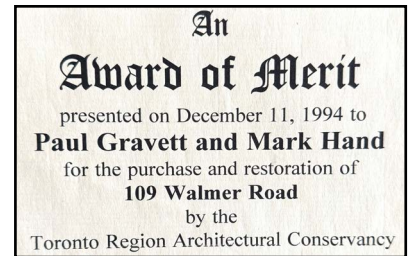
When Paul and Mark first encountered the house in 1990, neither of them knew much about the Arts and Crafts movement—its origins, philosophy, or Canadian practitioners. They responded instinctively to features they would later understand more fully: inglenooks, built-in seating and storage, large windows, and a disciplined restraint in ornament.

At that time, it had suffered from decades of unsympathetic alterations. Their restoration focused on recovering the spirit of the original interiors, rather than attempting an exact historical reconstruction. This has involved reinstating appropriate colour schemes, wallpapers, tiles, and built-in furniture, guided by period sources.

An article in the Winter 1994–95 issue of the William Morris Society of Canada journal observed that 109 Walmer Road “has significance beyond the charm it contributes to the streetscape of the West Annex.”<sup>16</sup> It describes the house as an important example of design inspired by the Aesthetic Movement in England, tracing its lineage through Shaw and Nesfield, Bedford Park, the American Shingle Style, and the work of C. F. A. Voysey. The interior, in particular, is linked to Voysey, with hints of Glasgow and Art Nouveau.

Like many large houses in central Toronto, it had been divided into apartments with only small kitchenettes and shared bathrooms. While this may have saved the house from demolition, it created challenges for restoration.

A complete photographic record of the restoration documented the contrast between the restored rooms and hallways and the semi-derelict state of the building. Photographs of original decoration, uncovered beneath layers of wallpaper and paint, make it clear that the house was conceived as an Aesthetic statement. The leaded windows, with their delicate patterns, are especially evocative of the style.



Many gallons of paint stripper were required



Dining room as purchased. All of the original built-in features had been stripped away. Unsightly metal fire doors had been added. Remnants of numerous kitchenettes were throughout.



Dining room about 1994. Some of the inglenook features have been re-built and flooring refurbished. A William Morris designed wallpaper, *Marigold*, covers the walls. Mission-style ceiling lights.





Living room as purchased showing the fireplace inglenook and leaded glass features. Here was another minimal kitchenette.



Living room about 1994 Painting of the walls completed and a hand stencilled frieze in an Art Nouveau pattern. A craftsman vintage light fixture installed.





The kitchen as purchased – plumbing exposed, scullery visible at left.



Kitchen about 1994. More updated appliances were installed. Mark and Paul built the dish rack above the sink whose back-splash incorporated the reproduction William de Morgan tiles.





"Willow" room as purchased. The elegant fireplace surround in this large bedroom retains an Art Nouveau design, but there is clearly much to do.



"Willow" room about 1994. A fresh paint job, and William Morris designed fabric on all the windows gave this room its name. Willow Boughs designed in 1887 is one of William Morris instantly recognisable patterns.





"Eastlake" room as purchased, one of the smallest bedrooms, had sustained bad water damage. Old wallpaper had to be stripped away.



"Eastlake" room about 1994. It was named for Eastlake furniture is a late-19th-century Victorian style championed by British architect Charles Eastlake. This style offered an alternative to heavy Victorian designs. We sourced some items while driving through upstate New York.





Watson room as purchased. This large bedroom was likely designed to be the principal bedroom with its typical coved ceiling. It featured its own inglenook and an adjoining room now blocked off, probably a dressing room.



Watson room about 1994, named after the original family who owned the house. Here it is freshly painted and featuring an antique Art Nouveau style bed, and its own sink.



"Kelmscott" room as purchased, one of the mid-size bedrooms, like many rooms were painted pink.



The name Kelmscott is synonymous with the English Arts and Crafts movement and the vision of William Morris – his idyllic Cotswold home, his publishing house, and his enduring decorative designs.





The main foyer with arched ceiling, fireplace and bay window. It is sadly bisected with drywall which encases the addition of a staircase accessed by a door on the front of the house giving access to a basement apartment.

By 1997 restorations were still a big work in progress. Restoring this foyer, uncovering walled-up servant stairs, fitting out the butler's pantry were just a few of the projects waiting for time and funds to complete.



There was evidence of layers and paint and wallpaper on many of the walls. The small trellis and striped pattern was probably the earliest Edwardian wall covering.

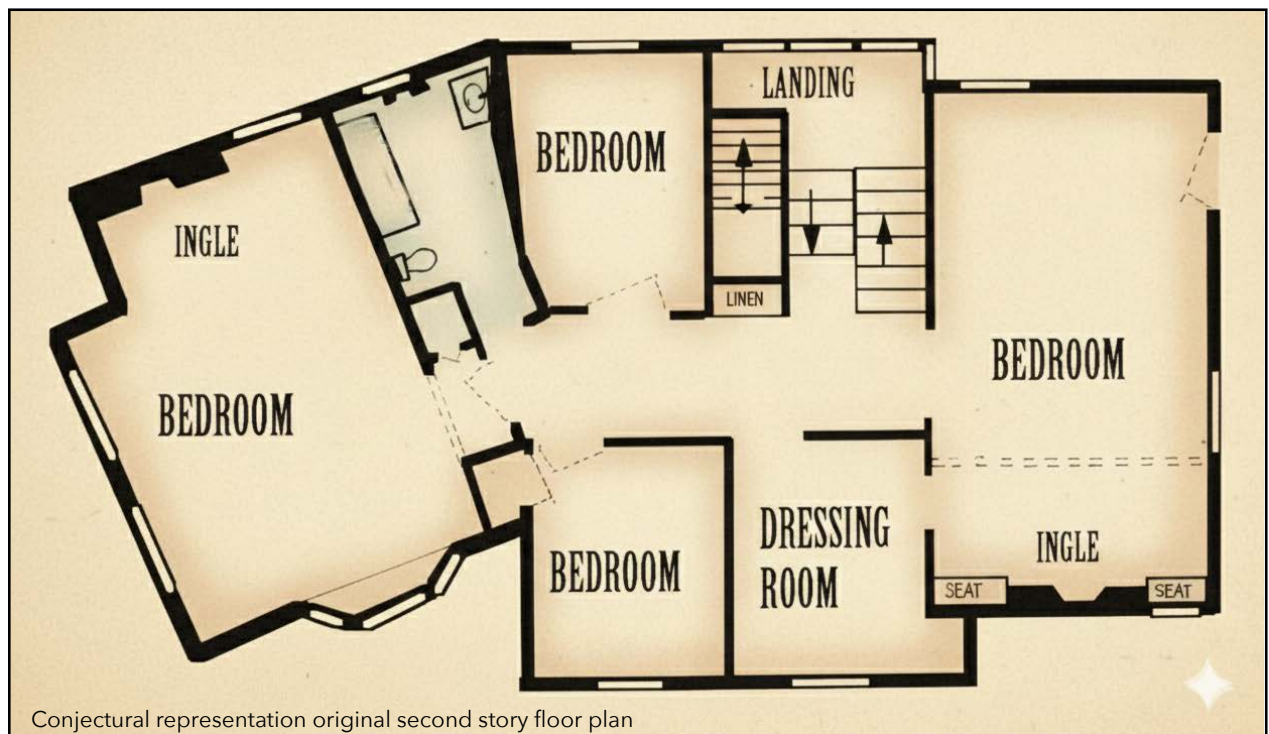
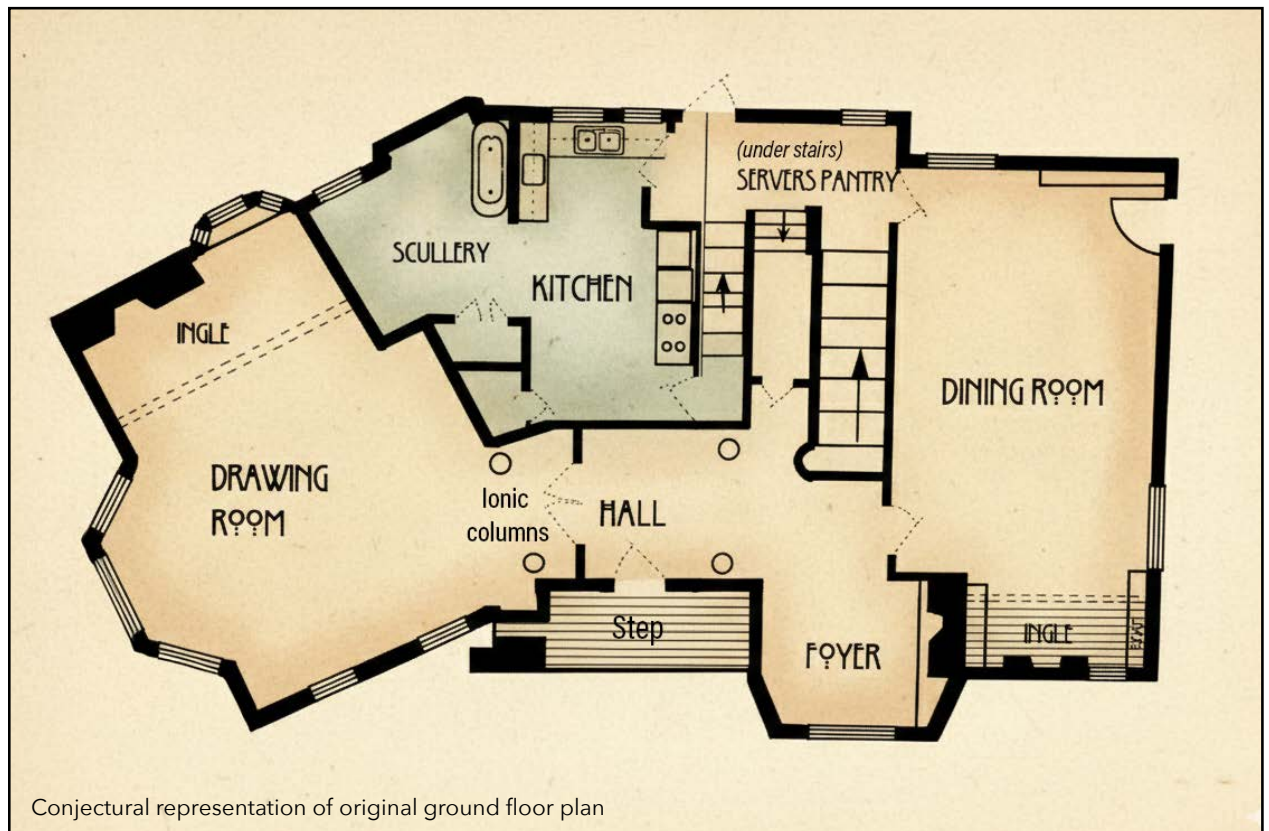


Upstairs bathroom as purchased, showing its own small fireplace and more leaded glass windows.



Upstairs bathroom about 1994, cleaned up and refurbished.





A third floor is composed of three additional sizable rooms and a bathroom.





James P. Watson



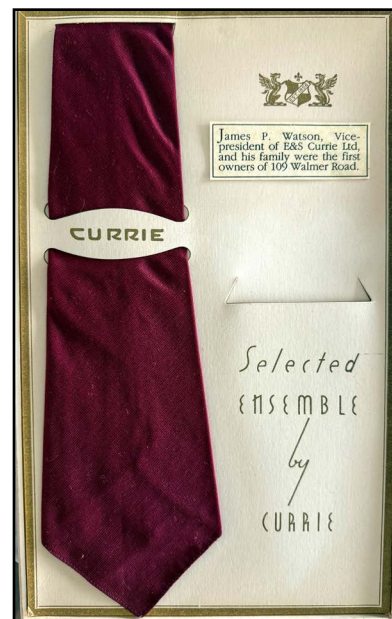
## THE FIRST OWNER: JAMES P. WATSON

JAMES PERRY WATSON, who appears in the 1904 city directory as the first resident of 109 Walmer Road, was a man whose career traced the arc of Edwardian Toronto's commercial ambitions. Born in 1863 in Fergus, Ontario, the son of a Scottish-born adventurer whose own career had included the Australian gold rush, Watson came to Toronto as a young man and worked his way up through the wholesale trade before marrying Jane Graeme Currie in 1890 — a union that proved as professionally consequential as it was personal. Jane's father, Edward Currie, had founded E. & S. Currie, a neckwear manufacturer that by the turn of the century commanded approximately 98 percent of all neckties and collars made in or imported into Canada. Watson joined the firm, rose to vice-president, and by 1904 was prosperous enough to commission — or purchase on completion — the new house on Walmer Road.

It is likely that there was a social connection between Watson and his architect. Both men were life members of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, and it is probable that Watson had encountered Townsend's work.

Watson's time at 109 Walmer Road was brief. The 1906 assessment rolls record him there with his wife, three children, and three servants — a household at the height of its domestic confidence. Then, almost simultaneously, two dramatic events reshaped the family's circumstances. In April 1904, the Great Toronto Fire devastated much of the downtown core, beginning in the very factory and salesrooms of E. & S. Currie. In the aftermath, Watson retrieved the stone door pull from the ruined building's entrance and told his employees: "What we don't need is a pull — what we need is a push."<sup>17</sup> And yes, the company rebuilt itself. And in 1908, Watson pivoted decisively away from neckwear altogether, drawn into mining finance by an encounter with investors during a holiday in England. He moved his growing family to a substantially grander house at 81 Admiral Road, and 109 Walmer Road passed to a new owner, George Wellington McGill, by 1907.

Watson went on to help found the Mining Corporation of Canada and died in 1940 at his Georgian Bay summer estate. His grandson Douglas Watson, who in the 1990s generously shared family recollections with the author, described a man of cultivated tastes, strong opinions, and considerable personal magnetism — qualities that seem entirely consistent with the house he chose.<sup>18</sup>



A Currie necktie package



Aftermath of the Great Toronto Fire of April 1904 at the Currie factory



James P. Watson in later years

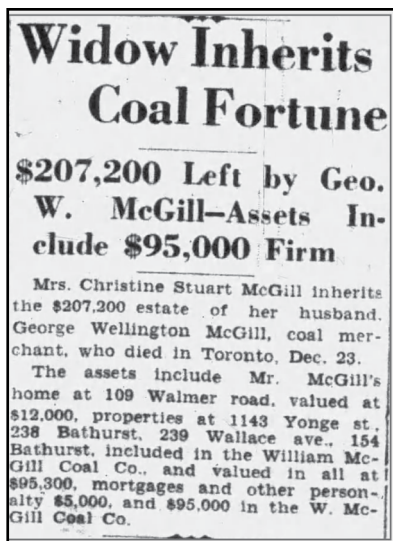


Probably George Wellington McGill  
Source: Ancestry.com

## OWNERSHIP, DECLINE, AND ADAPTATION

From 1907 until 1942, the house was owned by the McGill family. George Wellington McGill (April 3, 1863 – December 23, 1930) was president and sole owner of the coal and wood supplier William McGill & Co. He was an avid marksman, widely regarded as one of the finest duck shots in Canada, an organizer of the Toronto Gun Club, and a life member of a Masonic lodge. Before moving to Walmer Road, the McGills lived nearby at 53 Howland Avenue. Like many families of their standing, they also maintained a summer home at Hanlan's Point on the Toronto Islands and were active in island affairs. McGill's death in 1930 was front-page news in the *Toronto Star*, and his funeral service, conducted in the house.<sup>19</sup>

A 1931 article states his assets included the home at 109 Walmer road, valued at \$12,000. After his death, the house remained in the ownership of his widow, Christina McGill, until about 1940. She died in March 1952, just short of her eighty-fifth birthday. Her obituary in the *Toronto Star* notes that she became president of William McGill & Co. following her husband's death.<sup>20</sup>



The Evening Telegraph  
Jan 23, 1931

The later Subsequent ownership of the property is less fully documented. The later history of the house mirrors broader changes in the Annex. As wealthier families moved farther north in the early twentieth century, many large houses were divided into multi-tenanted dwellings. Newspaper advertisements from around 1942 indicate that the building offered a small number of furnished bed-sitting rooms, likely only two or three at first. By the 1950s, advertisements highlighted additional amenities, including in-room sinks, refrigerators, and telephone service. By the 1970s it had become a rooming house, divided into perhaps as many as a dozen units. When Mark and Paul acquired the house it was vacant and under receivership.



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# AMBLECOTE AND THE B&B

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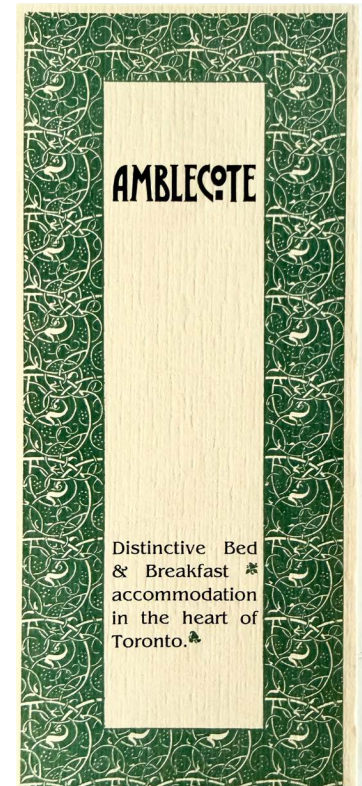
IN DECEMBER 1994, the Toronto Region Architectural Conservancy awarded the owners an Award of Merit for the purchase and restoration of 109 Walmer Road, the 5,000-square-foot house. The restoration process was later described in detail by Rachel Rafelman in a lengthy article titled *New Life for an Arts and Crafts Home*, published in the *Globe and Mail* on March 2, 1995.<sup>21</sup>

The decision was made to name the house Amblecote and to operate it as a bed and breakfast. The name was drawn from the town in England where some of Mark Hand's ancestors had lived. The day-to-day work of running a B&B involved coordinating bookings, planning menus, cooking, doing innumerable loads of laundry and ironing, all while working full-time at the owners' day jobs. Occupancy was nearly 90% once the B&B was established. Visitors were consistently friendly and invariably interesting.

Amblecote was conceived from the outset as a welcoming and inclusive space, and it cultivated a reputation as such within Toronto's arts and LGBT communities. At the time, Mark and Paul were both employed full time within the arts community, giving them valuable connections that led to numerous word-of-mouth accommodation bookings. The home became primarily a place to accommodate visiting visual and performing artists traveling to Toronto, including numerous Canadian and international visual artists, writers, instrumentalists, composers, conductors, and opera singers. Among the notable visitors were Raymond Murray Schafer, CC, was a Canadian composer, writer, and environmentalist; William Bolcom, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer; Suzie LeBlanc, the Canadian soprano; Gerald Finley, OC, CBE, the Canadian bass-baritone; and Aaron Kernis, the Pulitzer Prize and Grammy Award-winning American composer. Many left warm entries in the guest book that speak to the atmosphere Mark and Paul had created.

Amblecote hosted hundreds of guests from around the world. Canadians and Americans made up the majority, but visitors came from across Europe, Brazil, Australia, and Japan, among many others. Many guests were repeat visitors, some of whom have remained friends even after several decades.

The house was sold in 1997, when Mark and Paull relocated to Salt Spring Island in British Columbia. The new owners continued to operate it as a bed and breakfast for several years. Sometime after 2002 it passed to new owners, who returned it to use as a private residence and have made it their own.<sup>22</sup>



“You’ve created such a beautiful setting and made it feel friendly. We were happily here.”

William Elden Bolcom  
(Amblecote Guest book)

“Nine wonderful days of luxury in homely comfort and gourmet breakfast to remember many thanks”

Suzie LeBlanc, (Amblecote Guest book)

## EPILOGUE

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TODAY, 109 WALMER Road stands as a layered record of the Annex itself: from speculative Edwardian development, through decades of adaptation and subdivision, to restoration and renewed appreciation. It is also one of the most complete expressions of S. Hamilton Townsend's residential architecture—a house that reveals its character slowly, rewarding close attention—a continuing landmark in both the street and the neighbourhood.



# ENDNOTES

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- 1 In the early 19th century, the land that now makes up the Annex was primarily owned by the Baldwin family, specifically Dr. William Warren Baldwin, a wealthy lawyer and physician and his wife Phoebe Willcocks.
- 2 Permit #76, issued November 1901. Northeast corner of Walmer and Bernard. Permit #77, issued the same day for 87 Walmer.
- 3 Charles E. Goad, *Atlas of the City of Toronto and Suburbs*, sheet 32, fire insurance plan, 1910, Map and Data Library, University of Toronto
- 4 C.F.A. Voysey (1857–1941) was a prominent British architect and designer, known as a key figure in the Arts & Crafts movement and a forerunner to Modernism.
- 5 National Archives of Canada, Neg C1264
- 6 National Archives of Canada, Neg C87217
- 7 *The Canadian architect and builder* : [Vol. 11, no. 2 (Feb. 1898)] p. 28
- 8 Townsend's birth date of September 1856 and place of birth (Brantford, Ontario) are drawn from the 1891 Canadian Census. His obituary (*Toronto Star*, 28 March 1940) gives his age at death as 83, consistent with this date.
- 9 The Hamilton family connection and Eliza Hamilton's marriage to John Thomas Townsend are drawn from family records shared by Ann Macintosh Duff (letter to the author, 9 December 1999) and from the list of burials in the Hamilton Family Burial Ground at Willowbank, Queenston, Ontario.
- 10 The Bell telephone anecdote and the donation of the telephone to the National Science Museum in Ottawa are drawn from family recollections recorded by Ann Macintosh Duff (conversations with the author, 1990s).
- 11 *Toronto Star*, 28 March 1940 (obituary of S. Hamilton Townsend). The obituary states he graduated from the Model School in 1870 and received his early architectural instruction from W. G. Storm.
- 12 Townsend's founding role in the Ontario Association of Architects and his presidency in 1898 are documented in *Canadian Architect and Builder*, vol. 11, no. 2 (February 1898), p. 28. His lecture of April 1891 is noted in the association's records.
- 13 The bicycle tour through the American South with J. Gemmell is noted in *Canadian Architect and Builder*, vol. 10, January 1897, p. 5. The yacht

Wah-Wah and the Prince of Wales Cup win (1897) are noted in Townsend's *Toronto Star obituary*, 28 March 1940.

- 14 Willowbank and its history: Friends of Willowbank / Brock University Historic Houses exhibit, <https://exhibits.library.brocku.ca/s/historic-houses-in-niagara/page/willowbank-queenston>. The School of Restoration Arts was established at Willowbank in 2006
- 15 "S. Hamilton Townsend," *Dictionary of Architects in Canada*, online resource, [dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org/node/1361](https://dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org/node/1361) (accessed May 2026).
- 16 "The rebirth of 109 Walmer Road", *William Morris Society of Canada Newsletter* (Toronto), Winter 94/95, 19
- 17 The Great Toronto Fire of April 1904 and its origin in the E. & S. Currie factory: Wikipedia, "Great Fire of Toronto (1904)," citing contemporaneous newspaper sources. The "door pull" anecdote is from family recollections shared by Douglas Watson (conversations with the author, 1990s).
- 18 Watson's birth, career, and death are drawn from: *Star Weekly*, Toronto, 29 November 1930 ("J.P. Watson's sun rises and sets on mining world"); and *Toronto Star*, 12 September 1940 (obituary). His marriage to Jane Graeme Currie on 11 June 1890 is recorded in Archives of Ontario, Registrations of Marriages, 1869–1928.
- 19 *Toronto Star*, December 24, 1930.
- 20 *Toronto Star*, March 29, 1952.
- 21 Rachel Rafelman, "New Life for an Arts and Crafts House," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), March 2, 1995, 59.
- 22 Leanne Delap, "An Annex B&B closes shop and opens up," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), June 24, 2005, 74. Two other interesting Townsend home renovations have been featured. One i Rosedale which has retained its original street scape has been very modernized and profiled in both the *Globe and Mail* and the magazine *Dwell*. Jack Hauen, "Toronto guidelines force architects to keep a gentle hand with heritage homes," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), August 21, 2018. "Magnolia House," *Dwell*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.dwell.com/home/magnolia-house-c33f3e26>.  
And 109's neighbour at 113 Walmer is described here: "Walmer Duplex," Mehdi Marzyari Architects, accessed May 19, 2026, <https://www.me-mar.com/work/walmer-duplex/>.

See more photos of this project here: <https://bit.ly/4dQA0Du>  
or scan this code



SCAN ME





**Mark Hand (left) and Paul Gravett**

## A GESTURE OF WELCOME

An Arts and Crafts House at 109 Walmer Road, Toronto

In 1992, Mark Hand and his husband Paul Gravett bought a derelict house on a quiet corner of Toronto's Annex and unknowingly opened a door into another world. Behind boarded windows and peeling paint lay the ghost of an Arts and Crafts masterpiece by architect S. Hamilton Townsend — a house whose angled wings, inglenooks, and leaded-glass light had once embodied the domestic ambitions of Edwardian Toronto.

This booklet tells its story: from the speculative subdivision of the Annex in the 1880s, through the life and quietly remarkable career of Townsend himself — yachtsman, cycling enthusiast, and one of Toronto's most gifted residential architects — to the brief occupancy of the house's first owner, neckwear magnate James P. Watson, and the long decades of subdivision and decline that followed. At its heart, it is an account of a careful restoration: the slow recovery of a house that had almost lost itself, and its second life as Amblecote, a haven for visiting artists and musicians.

Illustrated throughout with archival photographs, floor plans, and before-and-after documentation of the restoration, this is at once an architectural study, a piece of Toronto social history, and a personal memoir of stewardship.